

THE FURNISHED ROOM.

By O. HENRY.

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Restless, shifting, fugacious as time itself, is a certain vast bulk of the population of the red brick district of the lower west side. Homeless, they have a hundred homes. They fit from furnished room to furnished room, transients forever—transients in abode.

Hence the houses of this district, having had a thousand dwellers, should have a thousand tales to tell, mostly dull ones no doubt, but it would be strange if there could not be found a ghost or two in the wake of all these vagrant guests.

One evening after dark a young man prowled among these crumbling red mansions, ringing their bells. At the twelfth he rested his lean hand baggage upon the step and wiped the dust from his hatband and forehead. The bell sounded faint and far away in some remote, hollow depths.

To the door of this the twelfth house whose bell he had rung came a housekeeper who made him think of an unwholesome, surfeited worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers.

"Come in," said the housekeeper. Her voice came from her throat; her throat seemed lined with fur. "I have the third floor back, vacant since a week back. Should you wish to look at it?"

The young man followed her up the stairs. A faint light from no particular source mitigated the shadows of the halls. They trod noiselessly upon a stair carpet that its own loom would have forsaken. It seemed to have become vegetable—to have degenerated in that rank, sunless air to lush lichen or spreading moss that grew in patches to the staircase and was viscous under the foot like organic matter. At each turn of the stairs were vacant niches in the wall. Perhaps plants had once been set within them. If so they had died in that foul and tainted air.

"This is the room," said the housekeeper, from her furry throat. "It's a nice room. It ain't often vacant. I had some most elegant people in it last summer—no trouble at all and paid in advance to the minute. The water's at the end of the hall. Sprows and Mooney kept it three months. They done a vaudeville sketch. Miss B'retta Sprows—you may have heard of her—Oh, that was just the stage names. Right there over the dresser is where the marriage certificate hung, framed. The gas is here, and you see there is plenty of closet room. It's a room everybody likes. It never stays idle long."

"Do you have many theatrical people rooming here?" asked the young man. "They comes and goes. A good proportion of my lodgers is connected with the theaters. Yes, sir; this is the theatrical district. Actor people never stays long anywhere. I get my share Yes; they comes and they goes."

He engaged the room, paying for a week in advance. He was tired, he said, and would take possession at once. He counted out all and paid in advance to the minute. The water's at the end of the hall. Sprows and Mooney kept it three months. They done a vaudeville sketch. Miss B'retta Sprows—you may have heard of her—Oh, that was just the stage names. Right there over the dresser is where the marriage certificate hung, framed. The gas is here, and you see there is plenty of closet room. It's a room everybody likes. It never stays idle long."

"A young girl, Miss Vasher—Miss Eloise Vasher—do you remember such a one among your lodgers? She would be singing on the stage, most likely—a fair girl, of medium height and slender, with reddish gold hair and a dark mole near her left eyebrow."

"No; I don't remember the name. Them stage people has names they change as often as their rooms. They comes and they goes. No; I don't call that one to mind."

No—always no; five months of ceaseless interrogation and the inevitable negative; so much time spent by day in questioning managers, agents, schools and choruses; by night among the audiences of theaters from all star casts down to music halls so low that he dreaded to find what he most hoped for. He who had loved her best had tried to find her. He was sure that since her disappearance from home this great, water girl city held her somewhere, but it was like a hold-atrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its up per granules of today buried tomorrow in ooze and slime.

The furnished room received its latest guest with a first glow of pseudo hospitality, a hectic, haggard, perfunctory welcome like the specious smile of a demirep. The soporific comfort came in reflected gleams from the decayed furniture, the ragged broadcloth upholstery of a couch and two chairs, a foot wide cheap pier glass between the two windows, from one or two gilt picture frames and a brass bedstead in a corner.

The guest reclined, inert, upon a chair, while the room, confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel, tried to discourse to him of its divers tenantry.

A polychromed rug like some brilliant flowered rectangular, tropical islet lay surrounded by a billowy sea of soiled matting. Upon the gay papered wall were those pictures that pursue the homeless one from house to house—"The Huguonot Lovers," "The First Quarrel," "The Wedding Breakfast," "Psyche at the Fountain." The mantle's chastely severe outline was ingloriously veiled behind some pert drapery drawn rakishly askew like the sashes of the amazonian ballet. Upon it was some desolate flotsam cast aside by

the room's marooned when a lucky sail had borne them to a fresh port—a trifling vase or two, pictures of actresses, a medicine bottle, some stray cards out of a deck.

One by one, as the characters of a cryptograph become explicit, the little signs left by the furnished room's procession of guests developed a significance. The threadbare space in the rug in front of the dresser told that lovely woman had marched in the throng. Tiny finger prints on the wall spoke of little prisoners trying to feel their way to sun and air. A splattered stain, raying like the shadow of a bursting bomb, witnessed where a hurried glass or bottle had splintered with its contents against the wall. Across the pier glass had been scrawled with a diamond in staggering letter the name Marie. It seemed that the succession of dwellers in the furnished room had turned in fury—perhaps tempted beyond forbearance by its garish coldness—and wreaked upon it their passions. The furniture was chipped and bruised; the couch, distorted by bursting springs, seemed a horrible monster that had been slain during the stress of some grotesque convulsion. Some more potent upheaval had cloven a great slice from the marble mantel. Each plank in the floor owned its particular cant and shriek as from a separate and individual agony.

It seemed incredible that all this malice and injury had been wrought upon the room by those who had called it for a time their home, and yet it may have been the cheated home instinct surviving blindly, the resentful rage of false household gods, that had kindled their wrath. A hut that is our own we can sweep and adorn and cherish.

The young tenant in the chair allowed these thoughts to flit, soft shod, through his mind, while there drifted into the room furnished sounds and furnished scents. He heard in one room a tittering and incontinent, slack laughter, in others the monologue of a scold, the rattling of dice, a lullaby and one crying dully. Above him a banjo tinkled with spirit. Doors banged intermitently; a cat yowled miserably upon a back fence. And he breathed the breath of the house—a dank savor rather than a smell—a cold, musty effluvia as from underground vaults, mingled with the reeking exhalations of linoleum and milled and rotten woodwork.

Then suddenly as he rested there the room was filled with the strong, sweet odor of mignonette. It came as upon a single buffet of wind with such sureness and fragrance and emphasis that it almost seemed a living visitant. And the man cried aloud, "What, dear?" as if he had been called, and sprang up and faced about. The rich odor clung to him and wrapped him around. He reached out his arms for it, all his senses for the time confused and commingled. How could one be peremptorily called by an odor? Surely it must have been a sound. But was it not the sound that had touched, that had caressed him?

"She has been in this room," he cried, and he sprang to wrest from it a token, for he knew he would recognize the smallest thing that had belonged to her or that she had touched. This enveloping scent of mignonette, the odor that she had loved and made her own—whence came it?

The room had been but carelessly set in order. Scattered upon the filmy dresser scarf were half a dozen hairpins—those discreet, indistinguishable friends of womankind, feminine of gender, infinite of mood and uncommunicative of tense. These he ignored, conscious of their triumphant lack of identity. Hantacking the drawers of the dresser, he came upon a discarded, tiny, ragged handkerchief. He pressed it to his face. It was racy and insolent with heliotrope. He hurried it to the floor. In another drawer he found odd buttons, a theater program, a pawnbroker's card, two lost marshmallows, a book on the derivation of dreams. In the last was a woman's black satin hair bow, which halted him, poised between ice and fire. But the black satin hair bow also is femininity's demure, impersonal, common ornament and tells no tales.

And then he traversed the room like a hound on the scent, skimming the walls, considering the corners of the bulging matting on his hands and knees, rummaging mantel and tables, the curtains and hangings, the drunken cabinet in the corner, for a visible sign, unable to perceive that she was there beside, around, against, within, above him, clinging to him, wooing him, calling him so poignantly through the finer senses that even his grosser ones became cognizant of the call. Once again he answered loudly, "Yes, dear!" and turned, wild eyed, to gaze upon vacancy, for he could not yet discern form and color and love and outstretched arms in the odor of mignonette. O God, whence that odor, and since when have odors had a voice to call? Thus he groped.

He burrowed in crevices and corners and found corks and cigarettes. These he passed in passive contempt. But once he found in a fold of the matting a half smoked cigar, and this he ground beneath his heel with a green and trenchant oath. He sifted the room from end to end. He found dreary and ignoble small records of many a peripatetic tenant, but of her whom he sought and who may have lodged there and whose spirit seemed to hover there he found no trace.

And then he thought of the housekeeper. He ran from the haunted room downstairs and to a door that showed a crack of light. She came out to his knock. He smothered his excitement as best he could.

"Will you tell me, madam," he besought her, "who occupied the room I have before I came?"

"Yes, sir. I can tell you again. 'Twas Sprows and Mooney, as I said Miss B'retta Sprows it was in the theaters, but Mrs. Mooney she was. My house is well known for respectability. The marriage certificate hung, framed, on a nail over."

"What kind of a lady was Miss Sprows—in looks, I mean?"

"Why, black haired, sir; short and stout, with a comical face. They left a week ago Tuesday."

"And before they occupied it?"

"Why, there was a single gentleman connected with the draying business. He left owing me a week. Before him was Mrs. Crowder and her two children that stayed four months, and back of them was old Mr. Doyle, whose sons paid for him. He kept the room six months. That goes back a year, sir, and further I do not remember."

He thanked her and crept back to his room. The room was dead. The essence that had vivified it was gone. The perfume of mignonette had departed. In its place was the old, stale odor of moldy house furniture, of atmosphere in storage.

The ebbing of his hope drained his faith. He sat staring at the yellow, singing gaslight. Soon he walked to the bed and began to tear the sheets into strips. With the blade of his knife he drove them tightly into every crevice around windows and door. When all was snug and taut he turned on the light, turned the gas full on again and laid himself gratefully upon the bed.

It was Mrs. McCool's night to go with the can for beer. So she fetched it and sat with Mrs. Purdy in one of those subterranean retreats where housekeepers forgo their and the worm dieh seldom.

"I rented out my third floor, back this evening," said Mrs. Purdy across a fine circle of foam. "A young man took it. He went up to bed two hours ago."

"Now, did ye, Mrs. Purdy, ma'am?" said Mrs. McCool, with intense admiration. "You do be a wonder for rentin' rooms of that kind. And did ye tell him, then?" she concluded in a husky whisper, laden with mystery.

"Rooms," said Mrs. Purdy in her furriest tones, "are furnished for to rent. I did not tell him, Mrs. McCool."

"This right ye are, ma'am; 'tis by rentin' rooms we kape alive. Ye have the rare sense for business, ma'am. There be many people will rayjet the rentin' of a room if they be told a suicide has been after dyin' in the bed of it."

"As you say, we has our living to be making," remarked Mrs. Purdy.

"Yes, ma'am; 'tis true. 'Tis just one wake ago this day I helped ye lay out the third floor, back. A pretty slip of a colleen she was to be killin' herself wid the gas—a swate little face she had, Mrs. Purdy, ma'am."

"She'd 'n' been called handsome, as you say," said Mrs. Purdy, assenting, but critical, "but for that mole she had a-growin' by her left eyebrow. Do fill up your glass again, Mrs. McCool."

selves into two parties, one carrying white flags and the other red ones. At a given signal the "reds" attack the "whites," striving to wrest away their flags, and the side which carries off most of these is proclaimed victor.

Wonderful conjurers are to be found at the street corners. They make swarms of birds fly from crystal bowls and flowers spring as if by magic from slender stems of bamboo.

Others show marvelous beetles harnessed with wax to paper carts or command the snakes that accompany them everywhere to perform extraordinary tricks.

A little farther on you will find an old woman who is making a curious sweetmeat of beans, called "torfu," over an oval brazier, and you can buy a big slab of this wrapped up in a cool leaf for a very small sum or, if you prefer it, a piping hot griddlecake costing no more. Acrobats, too, are as common as conjurers, and surely in no other land than this quaint little Japan do they twist themselves into such strange shapes.—Home Chat

Chamois Tobogganers. "Chamois toboggan down the steep white sides of the Alps with the skill of Norwegian skiers," said a millionaire. "I know," he went on, "for I have seen them do it. I spent a winter at St. Moritz, and on many a skimming trip I saw a chamois lie on his back and go skimming like the wind down a white precipice—a pretty sight. The creature's paws would be folded on his breast. His head, uplifted and frowning, would keep watch. Thus he'd skim down a half mile slope, growing smaller and smaller and finally disappearing in a whirl of snow."—Philadelphia Bulletin.

A Real Disappointment. "Yes, sir," Uncle Eben said to his nephew, "there are all kinds of disappointments in this world, Charley, and some of 'em are worse'n others. But they're all jest ways of feelin' bad for a minute. I guess 'bout the disappointin'jest disappointin' I ever have is when I feel and feel like sneezin' and it won't sneeze! That kinder gives you a notion of how all disappointments feel till you get over 'em."—Youth's Companion.

At It Again. Growells—This meat is scorched again. It's a pity you can't get a meal without burning something! Mrs. Growells—It's a pity you can't sit down to the table without roasting somebody!—Chicago News.

What Bothers Him. "There's two things about this blamed grapefruit that I can't understand," said Uncle Jerry Peebles. "One is that it's called 'grape' fruit and the other is that it's called grape 'fruit.'"—Chicago Tribune.

Travelers Guide.

CENTRAL RAILROAD OF PENNSYLVANIA.

Condensed Time Table effective June 17, 1909.

Table with columns: READ DOWN, STATIONS, READ UP. Lists stations like BELLEFONTE, HECLA PARK, HUBBERSBURG, etc., with corresponding times.

BELLEFONTE CENTRAL RAILROAD.

Schedule to take effect Monday, Jan. 6, 1910.

Table with columns: WESTWARD, STATIONS, EASTWARD. Lists stations like Bellefonte, Morris, Stevens, etc., with times.

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